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## “From Frustration to Escalation in Marawi”: An Interview on Conflict Transformation in Southeast Asia With the Indonesian Peace and Conflict Advisor Shadia Marhaban

Gunnar Stange

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Shadia Marhaban has been actively involved in international peace mediation, capacity building, and human rights activism for more than 20 years. She is from Aceh, Indonesia, where she joined the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in the early 2000s. She was an advisory member of GAM's peace negotiating team during the 2005 Helsinki talks that brought an end to nearly 30 years of armed conflict. After her return to Aceh, she became a founding member of the Aceh Women's League (LINA). The NGO was involved in reintegration programs for female ex-combatants and provided democracy education trainings. In recent years, her work has focused on facilitating dialog between conflicting parties in many regions of Southeast Asia affected by armed conflict. In her work, she is mainly engaged with resistance and liberation movements and their political transition. She believes that considering the dimensions of identity, religion, and culture is key to successful war-to-peace transitions and the achievement of sustainable modes of conflict resolution. With a background in political science and international relations, she is a fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, of Harvard University and has been teaching classes on mediation and conflict transformation at universities in Austria, Indonesia, and the US. In this interview, conducted by Gunnar Stange in Vienna in June 2018, Shadia Marhaban speaks about her peace-building work all over Southeast Asia and her experiences in violence prevention in the city of Marawi, Mindanao, Philippines.

**Keywords:** Conflict Transformation; Forced Migration; Marawi; Mindanao; Philippines

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**GUNNAR STANGE:** *During the last ten years, you have been working with armed resistance and liberation movements to support their transition from ‘arms to politics’. In which countries and with what groups have you been working and how successful has your work been?*

**SHADIA MARHABAN:** For the past ten years, I've been working in conflict affected areas in Southeast Asia such as in the Philippines, Myanmar, and South Thailand, as well as in conflict affected areas outside the region, like Nepal and Northeast India (Nagaland). I'm working with a multi-level approach from the combatant fronts up to the leadership and decision-making levels of these resistance and liberation movements. Aside from the direct engagement with the armed liberation fronts, I also work with civil society organizations that are aligned with

these movements, especially in the crafting of frameworks for peace negotiations with governments. In the Philippines, for example, I work with women, youths, or religious leaders to create an inclusive platform by which civil society organizations and other stakeholders can actively participate in the negotiations and the peace process through empowerment and awareness building. We organized international peace forums with leaders of liberation fronts, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)<sup>1</sup> and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)<sup>2</sup> in the Philippines, that tackled issues and concerns that arise in many peace process efforts all around the world. This includes support in the post-agreement stage to smoothen the transition of revolutionary armed groups to the political and development arena, to build up political parties, to prevent the abuse of power once empowered politically, and to establish transition mechanisms. The primary aim is to learn from experiences of non-state armed groups that have been engaging in peace processes in other countries.

It is quite difficult to measure the success of such efforts. Governments must also be committed to adopt positive changes in order for the agreements and other efforts to be successful. Political agreements are just an instrument to transform revolutionary organizations to be part of or lead a responsive government. However, there are visible changes in the awareness of the stakeholders that we work with. These changes can be best described as gradual shifts from individual, personal, and parochial perspectives to more organized and unified engagements with relevant stakeholders in the post peace agreement setting, such as the government, international organizations (IO), and civil society organizations (CSO). We aim at raising awareness for the political transition through capacity building by, for example, forming institutions that conduct trainings and employ mediation approaches.

*STANGE: As all over the world, we see a new turn to authoritarianism in some parts of Southeast Asia. What are the implications of these political trends for the resolution of armed conflicts in the region?*

*MARHABAN:* The trend towards authoritarianism affects the process of peace efforts, especially in the Philippines and Thailand. In the Philippines, the at first promising political order of the Duterte administration<sup>3</sup> finally transformed the political system from a largely democratic government into an authoritarian one. This had some positive and some negative implications for the country. The campaign of President Duterte against illegal drugs and the extrajudicial killings of drug suspects demonstrate the authoritarian turn of the government. It is a manifestation of impunity.

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1 The MILF is engaged in an armed secessionist campaign in the Southern Philippines aiming for the establishment of an independent Islamic State in large parts of the island of Mindanao. The organization broke away from the more secular oriented Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1978 (Abuza, 2005).

2 The MNLF started its insurgency against the Government of the Philippines in 1972. The movement's ultimate aim was the establishment of an independent nationstate for the Muslim population in the Mindanao region (Noble, 1976).

3 Rodrigo “Rody” Roa Duterte was elected the 16th President of the Philippines on 9 May 2016. Shortly after he had taken office, he initiated the so-called Philippine Drug War. Thus far, this campaign has led to the extrajudicial killing of thousands of alleged drug traffickers and users by the Philippine National Police, death squads, and ‘vigilant’ individuals (Johnson & Fernquest, 2018).

The rule of the ruler prevails over the rule of law. The campaign spread fear amongst the people and silenced human rights advocates. It also divided the Filipino people – some are resisting these developments, but the majority is supporting the campaign.

Regarding the peace talks between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines, the authoritarian leadership of President Duterte and his strong political commitment sped up the process that led to this year's passage of the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) into law, also known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL)<sup>4</sup>. The signing of the BOL into law by the president is a big leap in putting the armed conflict in Mindanao to an end. It is a new dawn for the Bangsamoro people who have been struggling for their right to self-determination for more than four decades now. It signifies the commitment of the government for the installation of a new political entity for Muslim Filipinos in the southern part of the country. With the signing of the BOL, the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) will be replaced by the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BAR).

STANGE: *Coming back to Aceh, the place where your career started: How sustainable is the peace in Aceh 13 years after the signing of the peace accord in Helsinki?*<sup>5</sup>

MARHABAN: I think the sustainability of any peace effort depends on its acceptability for the stakeholders and the commitment of the conflicting parties to implement signed agreements. After the signing of the peace agreement between GAM and the Government of Indonesia in 2005, Aceh's political landscape started to transform into a more democratic political system that facilitates people's participation in the government as well as the equal access of the people to the state's basic services such as health care, education, and infrastructure development. This can be considered a peace dividend that benefits the people of Aceh. Albeit the Helsinki agreement was not perfect, it provided the basis for the establishment of a peaceful and more developed Aceh. I would say the agreement will be sustained as long as the involved parties abide by it faithfully.

STANGE: *Are there lessons to be learned from the Aceh peace process for other peace processes and ongoing armed conflicts in the region?*

MARHABAN: Yes! The Aceh process became model and inspiration for other countries in Southeast Asia for the past 10 years. Aceh provided space for exchanges of experiences, knowledge sharing, and best practices. The key lesson to be learned is that the sincerity of both parties in implementing agreements is the main ingredient for a successful transformation from armed struggle to development. The political

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4 The BOL (Republic Act No. 11054), signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on 26 July 2018, is the legal implementation of the "Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro" – the peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the MILF that was signed in 2014 (International Crisis Group, 2018a).

5 On 15 August 2005, GAM and the Government of Indonesia signed the so-called Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Helsinki, Finland, after eight months of negotiations. The peace agreement ended nearly 30 years of armed conflict in Aceh and provided the basis for a renewed regional autonomy of the province of Aceh within the Indonesian nation state (Stange & Patock, 2010).

will of the parties, especially the government, to end violence is very important at all stages of peace negotiations. Challenges are always waiting somewhere along the way. Therefore, parties must be open and ready to face those challenges, use them as a tool in exploring new approaches and perspectives to sustain the installed political settlement and other peace mechanisms that are already working on the ground.

*STANGE: You are actively involved in violence prevention activities in the city of Marawi in the Southern Philippines. The city was overrun in May 2017 by the so-called Maute group, a pro-Islamic State group, and could only be liberated in October 2017 by the Philippine’s army and police. In how far was the event connected to the still unresolved Mindanao conflict that involves several armed groups?*

MARHABAN: Looking deeper into the emergence of new Moro<sup>6</sup> armed groups in Mindanao, it appears the main reason for their formation was frustration. Let me revisit the emergence of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in 2010, led by commander Umbra Kato. Kato was an active supporter of the peace talks between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines from the very beginning. His hopes for the establishment of a government that would address the grievances of the Moro people was very high during the drafting of the Memorandum of Agreement on the Muslim Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) under the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Unexpectedly, some political leaders in Mindanao filed a petition against the MOA-AD that led the Supreme Court of the Philippines to declare the agreement “unconstitutional” the night before the official signing in Kuala Lumpur in October 2008. Due to the ruling of the Supreme Court, the signing was instantly aborted by the government. The hopes of Umbra Kato for having his ideal government turned into hatred because of his frustration over the failed signing of the agreement. He lost his trust in the peace process, split from MILF, and established a new armed group called the BIFF with an even more radical Islamist agenda.

The Maute group consists of former members of the MILF under the command of Abdullah Macapaar, also known as Commander Bravo. Its members were actively involved in the MILF’s efforts to continue the peace talks in the early 2010s. However, due to the dragging process combined with the influence of the global jihadi ideology, they separated from the group of Commander Bravo and set up their own group. They started to recruit members by capitalizing on the incapability of the government to address the grievances of the Moro people in Mindanao. They talked to other frustrated members of MILF, aggressive and idealist youths, especially out-of-school youths. They established their forces’ visibility and gained support from the local communities of Butig municipality in the province of Lanao del Sur (Mindanao). In the middle of 2016, the Maute group started to attack government establishments and military check points in the locality. In December the same year, they attacked the town Butig, Lanao del Sur. They successfully took over the old municipal hall of Butig, raised the ISIS<sup>7</sup> flag, and declared their group a local front of ISIS in the

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6 The term “Moro” was initially used by the Spanish colonial regime referring to the predominantly Muslim population in the Southern Philippines. Nowadays, the term is used as a self-designation by most Muslims in and from the Southern Philippines.

7 ISIS stands for the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” to which the group had pledged allegiance. Before

Philippines. Around 1,000 families were displaced because of this incident. Schools, houses, and other civilian properties were damaged. After the Butig war, the Maute group moved to the City of Marawi to expand their operation. They established their base in the heart of the city. Out of frustration, they started again to promulgate incompetency of the MILF and the government in addressing corruption and vices in the “Islamic city of Marawi”. They claimed that they were the ones who cleaned the city from sin and from the vices of corrupt leaders. Finally, on 23 May 2017, the siege happened! It caused the displacement of more than 200,000 residents. Tall buildings, mosques, and malls were completely destroyed. The crowded city turned into a ghost town. You could not see a single soul walking in the streets for months.

*STANGE: As you said, during the siege of Marawi, more than 200,000 residents were internally displaced. What were the humanitarian implications of this, and has this crisis been resolved?*

*MARHABAN:* The loss of lives and livelihoods as well as damaged and destroyed infrastructure are the more visible consequences of the crisis. However, there are deeper implications, not only for the internally displaced persons (IDP) but also for the Maranao<sup>8</sup> people as a whole. The crisis generated mistrust towards the government and the peace process. It also divided the people, not only the Maranaos but also the larger Bangsamoro people. New dynamics emerged between the clan of Maute and other Maranao clans – they started to accuse each other of being the real culprit in destroying Marawi. The crisis also exposed children, youths, and women to threats such as recruitment to armed groups, child labor, and abuses. These vulnerable groups of the community are the most affected by the crisis. Children cannot go to school because their schools are destroyed. Mothers lost their children during the crisis and are struggling to recover from physical and mental wounds. Children lost their parents. Relationships and families broke apart. These are the deeper humanitarian implications of the crisis. There are ongoing efforts in addressing the humanitarian crisis. Various government agencies are working together in addressing the recovery needs, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of Marawi. They set up the so-called Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM)<sup>9</sup>. TFBM drafted a recovery and rehabilitation plan for the affected areas. However, the implementation of the plan is slower than expected. Aside from the slow implementation, the Maranaos are questioning the inclusivity of the plan. According to them, TFBM drafted the plan without proper consultation with the victims. The TFBM intervention is mainly focusing on infrastructure related development – housing, clearing of debris in the ground zero, and provision of temporary shelter for the IDPs. Local NGOs, with support of international NGOs, are engaging in psycho-social recovery work with the victims.

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pledging allegiance to ISIS, the Maute group operated as private militia headed by the matriarch Farhana Maute that backed local politicians by the use of coercion and extorted local businesses (International Crisis Group, 2018b).

8 Maranao (the people of the lake) is the official designation for the predominantly Muslim population originally living in the area of Lake Lanao on Mindanao island. They are part of the Moro group.

9 Task Force to Re-Build Marawi.

STANGE: *How would you describe the situation in Marawi today, and how long will it take to rebuild the city and rehabilitate the victims?*

MARHABAN: Many of the victims are now in diaspora. You can find them in the vicinity of Marawi but also anywhere in the Philippines. They were forced to leave Marawi and settle somewhere else in the country to survive. I think it will take time for Marawi to totally recover from this havoc. The government may manage to reconstruct the damaged houses of the civilians, but the broken identity of the Maranao people will be difficult to ‘repair’. There are deep scars in their hearts brought by the crisis. It needs serious efforts in transitional justice to help reconstruct the torn social fabric of the people. We need to address the following questions: Why and how did the crisis happen? Who are the victims, and who are the perpetrators? What is adequate justice for the victims? How about reparations for the damaged properties? And, last but not least, how to ensure that the same will not happen again? Finding answers to these questions is how I try to contribute to the rehabilitation of Marawi and the Maranaos. However, this effort needs a lot of resources and commitment of both the government and the victims. Further, there should be a working coordination mechanism to ensure interventions and engagements are complimentary to each other and not overlapping or even contradicting.

STANGE: *Last but not least, what kind of measures would it need to prevent a crisis such as the ‘siege of Marawi’ from happening again?*

MARHABAN: First, it will be important to carefully evaluate the recovery and rehabilitation interventions for Marawi to make sure that they do not trigger part two of the siege. It is important to have a comprehensive and inclusive rehabilitation plan for the city – a plan that ensures that all important stakeholders are involved in the process to avoid deprivation and division of the people. The Marawi siege brought multiple layers of damages to the Maranao people – physical, emotional, political, and spiritual. Those layers need to be considered in the attempt to rehabilitate the city. The failure to contemplate on any of these layers may deviate results of any intervention to something else. To prevent this from happening again in Marawi or in other part of the world, there must be a strong foundation of good governance from the local government units (LGUs) up to the national government. People must feel the presence of the government through an equal access to basic services, meaningful participation, and the representation of important sectors of society in decision-making processes, especially decisions that affect people’s personal views and beliefs. Functioning information mechanisms should also be established in the local government units to ensure that the efforts of the government are transmitted to the people. The people, on the other hand, should be able to report security issues, calamities, disasters, and other information to the government for appropriate responses and actions. However, this cannot be done by the government alone. This also requires active community participation. There should be a platform from the municipal government down to the local *barangay*<sup>10</sup> units on which people can freely

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10 The village level. Smallest administrative unit in the Philippines.



share and listen to information on issues like security threats and corruption. I think civil society organizations can play a role in establishing this platform. Hard work is needed for this platform to gain legitimacy from the community and the government.

STANGE: *Shadia, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview.*



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Gunnar Stange currently holds a position as Assistant Professor in Human Geography at the Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna, Austria. He received his PhD from the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. His research interests include peace and conflict studies, development studies, and forced migration. His regional focus is on Southeast Asia.

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